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ABSTRACT

This factsheet considers the psychological task of adolescence, explains the adolescent's separation from his/her parents, and gives child and parent checklists for evaluating family functioning. Patterns of family development are discussed, including midlife parental development and the influence of previous generations. The role of non-family adults is described. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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Understanding and Parenting Adolescents

Living with a teenage son or daughter on a daily basis often makes parents feel anxious, angry, uncertain, or inept. Despite the occasional horror story regarding adolescence, the majority of teenagers in America navigate this phase of development quite well. Unfortunately, parents cannot know with certainty the health and strength of their adolescent until several years after they leave this phase (Klimek, 1987). On the one hand, parents may have some control over their child's behavior and may get their youngster to conform to their standards, but the child's personality may not be developing in optimal health. Conversely, the adolescent who goes against the grain of the family, especially a dysfunctional family, may look ill on the outside, but may be coming into his/her own health on the interior. In short, the process of real growth during the adolescent years (and in adulthood) may not be easily discernible even by child development experts.

Psychological Task of Adolescence

The task of becoming one's own person, as opposed to mimicking parental and societal roles, is the major job of adolescence. This process, however, is not simple and in many respects is similar to the mourning-loss-grief phase seen in adults. Episodes of doubt, caution, fear, vulnerability, and susceptibility to bronchial infections, colds, and physical aches and pains are symptoms of the depressive phase of adolescence. Manic phases are reflected in elevated mood, loudness, hyperactivity, excitability, poor judgment, and the desire to get away from home. Vacillation between these phases is necessary to maneuver successfully through the adolescent years (Klimek, 1987). To be manic all the time is to short-circuit the development of a sensitive, caring, responsible, and real inner core. To be depressed all the time is to limit the positive influences and interactions of the real world. Furthermore, most parents, teachers, and counselors have every right to be concerned when a youngster appears chronically depressed and should seriously consider a referral for professional help.

Getting Better—Getting Worse

Because adolescence is a time for separating from the direct, day-to-day influence and control of parents, it is also a time when youngsters minimize their dependence upon parents for love, support, care, direction, and security. Adolescence is a phase when relationships with peers and reality slowly replace the relationship with parents. In dysfunctional families, youngsters often are unable to chart a healthy course of separation-individuation because they try to get away from parental influence too early and become excessively peer dependent. Teenagers of dysfunctional families may be unprepared to separate-individuate also because they lack an adequate foundation of the self, or because parental dependence and neglect holds them back. Such youngsters seldom navigate a course of healthy adaptation because they essentially have had an unhealthy upbringing.

Regardless of the family's health, the adolescent's pulling away from parental control toward self-direction and peer influence carries with it a delicate balance. This balance consists of getting better or getting worse, both psychologically and behaviorally. Many parents are too emotionally involved with their children or too caught up with their own problems to help the youngsters chart their way. Therefore, a checklist of inner life processes may be helpful in determining whether a child (or parent) is growing or regressing.

Child and Parent Checklist

A few times each year, parents are encouraged to evaluate their teenager and themselves for indications of healthy or unhealthy functioning. Parents are also encouraged to help their child or themselves work on one characteristic at a time to avoid unrealistic expectations of "instant perfection." It is the direct work on oneself that enables parents to become more patient and empathic with their child. Real growth is extremely difficult and requires a great deal of consciousness, encouragement, and support if one is to achieve higher levels of mental health. If parents are also growing, they will know the difficulty of real growth and tend to be less critical, controlling, demanding, and rejecting, while becoming more sensitive, caring, and loving.

The observable behaviors that reflect inner, psychological mechanisms are listed below. When parents are conducting the evaluation, they should see improvements in the following areas if growth is occurring:

- Self-containment
- Self-knowledge
- Self-fulfillment
- Capacity for appreciation or gratitude
- Openmindedness
- Peace of mind
- Skill acquisition or mastery
- Self-direction and capacity to plan ahead and be responsible

Conversely, if a child or parent is worsening or psychologically regressing, the following characteristics are more prevalent:

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- Anger, hostility, resentment or bitterness
- Depression, despair, hopelessness, or cynicism
- Rigidity
- Obsessions—alcohol, sex, drugs
- Envy, jealousy
- Increased self-centeredness
- Disregard for feelings of others
- Conflictual or dissatisfying interpersonal relationships
- Little or no capacity for appreciation

Patterns of Family Development

Familiarity with the stages of family life helps in determining how and why a particular family may be having difficulty accommodating, restructuring, and changing in support of the developing adolescent. When a family is understood as a system, change or difficulty in one part of the family is viewed as affecting all of the family members (Bowen, 1978). The midlife stage of parental development often coincides with the adolescent stage of individual development, typifying how stress in one part of the family can affect the other part.

Midlife Parental Development. Parents in the midlife reappraisal stage may focus too much energy on career crisis, loneliness, or anticipation of the empty nest. They may become highly resistant to changes associated with adolescent development, feeling that change suggests failure or fearing the unknowns of their child's pulling away. A primary source of difficulty for these parents is their own inadequate separation from their family of origin, as well as their own unresolved adolescent issues. Parents in this struggle can become short-sighted and overreact to the periodic oppositional and negative behaviors that are typical of adolescence.

If parents become rigid, defensive, and over-controlling, their adolescents are likely to feel imprisoned and stifled, and conflict is inevitable. Some adolescents in these instances may experience a significant diminution in self-development as they compromise themselves in an effort to save their families. They can also get caught in triangulated relationships with their parents when they unconsciously assimilate parental pain, thus stabilizing the family by keeping the parents focused on them instead of their own conflicts. Adolescents in unsupportive families may experience excessive pressure to excel in order to boost their parents' self-esteem.

Influence of Previous Generations. The root of numerous adolescent struggles is the inability to separate-individuate adequately from their families. The format for such conflict often stems from similar problems of family members in previous generations (Haley, 1980). When adolescents challenge the family's history, traditions, or values, family members have to develop negotiation skills in order to redefine family rules, roles, and relationships. This negotiation and redefinition serves to adjust, accommodate, and encourage the adolescent process of separation-individuation. The influence of siblings is important to understand, particularly when one child is regarded as "good and perfect." Such special-status youngsters often stimulate an opposite reaction among the other siblings which proves baffling to the parents.

In general, adolescent problem behaviors need to be evaluated in light of the entire spectrum of family issues that may be interfering with the natural progression of individual development. If this is understood, appropriate responses can be planned and negotiated among family members so that a healthy resolution is achieved for everyone.

Role of Adults Outside the Family

Reliable, significant others outside the family play an important role in facilitating the transition from adolescence to adulthood. These outside adults need to understand individual growth and family dynamics, as well as to possess a level of self-development that enables them to apply their knowledge appropriately. They also need to maintain a realistic view of the temporary resistance, allegiance, or idealization that teenagers form in response to adults who try to help them. Counselors need to anticipate and recognize the transference reactions typical of adolescents who are working out unresolved family issues in the counseling relationship. To become aware of family themes and patterns over generations, counselors can employ genograms which help adolescents objectively locate and identify factors influencing their self-image, response to life, and reactions to relationships (Hartman, 1978).

Summary

To facilitate authentic adolescent growth, parents and other concerned adults need to (1) achieve and maintain emotional neutrality; (2) develop the capacity for genuinely relating to and enjoying the uniqueness of each youngster; and (3) adhere to the larger developmental perspective. Regardless of the potential for problems during adolescence, the majority of teenagers who go "off course" usually get back on during their early or mid-twenties. When one scrutinizes the process of parenting and the process of adolescent development, it is a small wonder that anyone does very well. Yet professional help is not always the answer—to paraphrase Karen Horney, one of the first psychoanalysts to study family influences, life itself teaches us best how to grow.

Resource Documents

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